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Supply-and-demand demographics:

Dowry, daughter aversion and marriage markets in contemporary north India

Introduction

One feature of India's demographic profile that has attracted demographers' attention for many decades has been its masculine sex ratio. This interest received a marked impetus when India's 2001 census indicated that child sex ratios (CSR, the sex ratio of children aged 0-6) had become significantly more masculine since the 1991 census. CSRs had been becoming more masculine throughout India since the 1970s and at an accelerating pace since the mid-1980s. Fertility has been declining throughout India, with its onset later and slower in the north and north-west than in the south. Similarly, processes associated with sex bias are not spatially random (Guilmoto & Attané 2007).

My research in rural Uttar Pradesh since the early 1980s has focused on gender issues, including those related to these demographic changes and their linkages to family-life and the wider economy. This paper, however, is primarily based on my exploration of various relevant research literatures, including those of demographers. Whilst my argument draws only indirectly on my own research experience, it is nevertheless heavily informed by it—most particularly by my feeling that the assertions made by some demographers about the connections between dowry, 'daughter aversion' and India's increasingly masculine CSRs fail to make sense of processes on the ground.

Several demographers suggest that India's demographic profile will result in a 'marriage squeeze', in which the relative sizes of cohorts of potential brides and potential grooms imply that brides will be in short supply. Christophe Guilmoto, for instance, cautiously notes that 'while discrimination against unborn girls today is a dismal reflection of the status of women, sex imbalances may also lead tomorrow to the potential disruption of marriage systems set off by the unavoidable shortage in prospective brides' (2012: 78). He does not, however, align himself with P. N. Mari Bhat and Monica Das Gupta and their colleagues, who have outlined some rather optimistic but questionable connections between dowry, daughter aversion and the marriage squeeze (Bhat & Halli 1999; Das Gupta & Li 1999; Das Gupta et al. 2003). When grooms are scarce, their argument runs, the marriage squeeze works against women: dowries increase because larger numbers of brides seek scarce grooms, and parents become more daughter averse. In light of the recent decline in fertility and the use of sex-selective abortions, Bhat and Das Gupta predict that potential brides will become scarce, the marriage squeeze will begin to operate against potential grooms—and parents will become less

daughter averse because dowry will decline in importance.¹ This deployment of an economic framework in the realm of kinship and gender politics rang danger bells for me, however—and my disquiet impelled me to think through and elaborate the reasons for my disquiet. This paper, then, is the result of my reflections on what might be termed ‘supply-and-demand demographics’.

I shall argue that however plausible Bhat’s and Gupta’s predictions might seem at first glance, they cannot withstand close scrutiny. Even within its own terms, their economic marriage squeeze model can be faulted because it seriously over-simplifies the complexities of marriage arrangements in India. Examining how marriages are arranged ‘on the ground’ provides a more fruitful means of interrogating the links between dowry, daughter aversion and the marriage squeeze.

Further, whilst one aspect of dowry *might* relate to the supply and demand of brides and grooms, dowry and daughter aversion are not simply outcomes of demographics alone. As I shall also argue, marriage migration is crucial in understanding daughter aversion. But nor is dowry just a matter of marriage and kinship practices either. Put somewhat differently, gender politics are everywhere. There is no escaping them. And it is vital to see dowry as a polyvalent institution that also connects with conspicuous display in status competition in a hierarchical society and with people’s rising aspirations to possess consumer goods within the wider context of contemporary India’s rapidly changing political economy. Crucially, marriage migration, status competition and consumerism do not necessarily push in the same direction as the demographics of the marriage squeeze might imply when it comes to dowry and daughter aversion.

Gender Bias in a time of Fertility Decline

This paper is mainly concerned with areas of north and north-west India (e.g. Punjab and Haryana) that both historically and currently are notorious for having the most masculine CSRs in India (Arokiasamy 2004, 2007; Dyson 2001; Visaria 2004b)—including what Philip Oldenburg (1992) notably termed the ‘Bermuda triangle for girls’. But there has also been spatial diffusion of increasingly masculine CSRs encompassing contiguous areas elsewhere in northern India. Indeed, the 2011 census indicates that CSRs have plateaued in Punjab and Haryana, but CSRs have become more masculine in several other northern states (e.g. UP,

¹ It is important to note here that quantifying the potential ‘surplus’ of marriageable men depends on the parameters used and other demographers have arrived at different conclusions on this score. See, for instance, Neelakantan & Tertilt (2008) as well as Guilmoto (2012).

Bihar, Rajasthan, Uttarakhand). In northern India, declining fertility is associated with couples' increasing efforts to affect the gender balance of their children (Guilmoto 2008; Guilmoto & Attané 2007), an important downside of what Satish Balram Agnihotri (2000: Chapter 8) terms 'prosperity optimism'. The implications of this demographic shift are already being researched by sociologists and anthropologists (e.g. John et al. 2008; Larsen 2011; Purewal 2010).

Until the 1980s, masculine CSRs were basically explicable in terms of differential care of girls and boys that led to higher rates of infant and child mortality among girls. Even today, in the northern states, female disadvantage sets in very soon after the neonatal period (when boys are biologically more at risk) (Arokiasamy & Gautam 2008). Since the mid-1980s, however, new technologies (first amniocentesis, latterly ultrasound) have become widely available and affordable. These technologies were initially developed as the means of detecting foetal abnormalities in utero but they are also capable of determining foetal sex. As many commentators have noted in respect of technological innovation in general, new technologies do not enter neutral fields: and in the context of widespread gender bias in India, ultrasound is now widely used for sex determination followed by sex-selective abortion (despite legislative interventions outlawing such usage). Discussions of the incidence and social distribution of sex-selective abortions in India are necessarily based on estimates, however, since reliable information is scarce (e.g. Agnihotri 2001a; Arnold et al. 2002; Guilmoto 2009; Patel 2007). Fred Arnold et al. (2002) estimated that sex-selective abortions accounted for over 100,000 out of a total of 1.3 million abortions per annum by the turn of the millennium. More recently, Purushottam Kulkarni (2012) has calculated that around 400,000 sex-selective abortions are performed each year, accounting for the major part of the female deficit in the CSRs; masculine sex ratios at birth (SRB) are another indication of sex-selective abortions and SRBs in India during the 2000s have hovered around 900 (even dipping to 880 in 2003-4). Normal SRBs are around 930-960 girls per 1000 boys (equivalent to 104-107 males per 100 females).²

Some commentators argue that there is a substitution effect, with neglect and differential care being replaced by sex-selective abortion (e.g. Goodkind 1996). By contrast, Monica Das Gupta & P. N. Mari Bhat (1997) talk of an intensification effect, with increased discrimination against girls when fertility declines faster than the desired number of sons; they considered that excess female child mortality accounted for four times more missing girls than sex-

² Demographers of India usually express sex ratios such as SRB and CSR in terms of the number of females per 1000 males, whilst the international convention is for sex ratios to express the number of males in relation to females.

selective abortion in the mid- to late-1990s, although they predicted that sex-selection would play an increasingly significant role. P. N. Mari Bhat & A. J. Francis Xavier (2003) rephrase intensification as a 'son preference' effect that can more effectively be put into practice because of newly available technology. Similarly, S. Sudha & S. Iduraya Rajan (1999, 2003) consider that girls face 'double jeopardy' from neglect compounded by sex-selective abortion and Agnihotri (2001b, 2003) considers that sex-selective abortion can co-exist with the continuation of discrimination against those girls who are born.

Indeed, educated, wealthy urban residents are apparently more likely than poorer rural residents to practise sex-selective abortions, but they discriminate less against girls they allow to be born; by contrast, excess female child mortality is more marked for children of poorer and uneducated mothers (Agnihotri 2003; Arokiasamy 2004, 2007; Attané & Guilmoto 2007). It also seems that the economically advantaged 'pioneer' sex-selective abortions and the practice gradually seeps down the class hierarchy within localities (Guilmoto 2008; Guilmoto & Attané 2007). Consistent with this is the spread of masculine CSRs to new areas in northern India as well as in the south, beginning in the urban centres and gradually spreading to rural areas (Agnihotri 2003).

Sex ratios at birth are most masculine for Sikhs and Jains, followed by Hindus (Bhat & Xavier 2007; Guilmoto 2008). Probably because of improvements in Scheduled Castes' economic position, masculine CSRs among them are intensifying, so narrowing the gap between them and the general population (Bhat 2002a, 2002b; Bhat & Xavier 2003; Siddhanta et al. 2009). Broadly, Muslims reflect the overarching regional patterns, yet within regions Muslims have less masculine CSRs than their neighbours (Guilmoto 2008). Muslims both express less preference for sons and rarely practise sex-selective abortion (Bhat & Xavier 2003, 2007). Further, their children (including girls) have a mortality advantage that cannot be readily explained by the differentials in wealth and education that seem to relate to CSR differences for caste Hindus and Scheduled Castes (Bhalotra et al. 2010a, 2010b).

Demographers generally consider that fertility will continue to decline in India, with a gradual convergence between the different regions. There is less agreement, however, about the gender bias in this process. Some sources suggest that the SRB has begun to plateau (Bhat 2002b; Bhat & Xavier 2003) and that son preferences will decline (Visaria 2004a). Others, however, have predicted that India's sex ratios will continue to become more masculine (Das Gupta & Bhat 1997; Mayer 1999) and that son preferences will be manifest for some decades, especially if the social and economic root causes are not removed (Guilmoto & Attané 2007). In particular, the north-west is likely to have masculine CSRs before they might begin to

plateau (Das Gupta 2009; Kaur 2007). Much of the rest of north India, where fertility decline has developed later, will probably have worsening CSRs, at least for a time (Guilmoto 2009).

Dowry and Daughter Aversion

Dowry has a long history in northern India and much of the vast literature exploring the reasons behind the marked gender bias in the fertility transition focuses on parental fears about the financial implications of having to provide daughters with dowries. Most writers focus on the items that are transferred shortly before a marriage (e.g. at engagement ceremonies) and especially at the time of a marriage. These include clothing and jewellery given by the bride's family to the bride herself and other items (sometimes termed 'groomprice') that are destined for the groom and his relatives (e.g. household goods, vehicles, cash, clothing, jewellery). It is important to emphasise, however, that local understandings regard dowry as inseparable from other outlays faced by the bride's family: particularly hospitality during the wedding festivities and the patterns of gift-giving from a bride's natal kin to her affines that are initiated at the wedding and endure throughout the marriage and beyond. The dowry is usually the most substantial of these transfers, but the continuing giving sustains a bride's links with her natal kin. When a married daughter visits her parents she should return to her husband's home with gifts, and festivals, harvests and family events (births of sons, marriages etc.) are also marked by this unilateral flow of goods, which may comprise clothing, jewellery, livestock, and/or portions of grain crops. Parents who are unable to fulfil these obligations may stop inviting their daughter for visits or attending weddings in her in-laws' household. In northern India, these patterns of giving were historically particularly associated with upper caste Hindus and framed in terms of *kanya-dān* (gift of a virgin, in which the bride's parents give the bride with no expectation, or indeed option, of any return), and its associated implications of hypergamy and status asymmetry between wife-givers and wife-takers (Basu 2001, 2005a; Jeffery & Jeffery 1996; Kumari 1989; Sharma 1984; Srinivas 1984).

I am not aware of any systematic national- or even regional-level studies with time-series data on marriage payments. Furthermore, small-scale studies have used different definitions of dowry. This means that we cannot draw firm conclusions on how dowry has changed. But we do have a fairly good idea of how people themselves *think* that dowry has changed. Since the publication of the report on The Status of Women in India (ICSSR 1975), a standard narrative about dowry has attained a commonsense status in academic and popular media accounts alike. The nearest thing to an overall account is provided by All India Democratic Women's Association based on some 10,000 interviews around the country (AIDWA 2003). Its findings lend support to the commonsense view. People surveyed dated several major changes from about the mid-1980s: dowry appeared in regions where it was virtually unknown and

spread within regions to groups that previously did not give dowry. Dowry has apparently increased in quantity (although whether in real terms and in relation to incomes cannot be determined). Certainly, new items should be included and cash is now seen as crucial. Increasingly, dowry is associated with more overt and aggressive demands for specific items made by the groom's family, and brides whose parents fail to comply are said to be at risk of increasing levels of harassment (and even murder). According to AIDWA (2003), women often saw dowry as vital for their own security. There are also indications that more educated men command larger dowries, dowries are largest among the most wealthy, poorer families often incur serious debts to provide dowries, and that the continued giving over the years is viewed as increasingly burdensome.

These findings concur with numerous other sources. M. N. Srinivas (1984: 19) considers that dowry had become obligatory and already by the 1980s was characterised by 'asymmetry [i.e. hypergamy], uncertainty and unpredictability' because of demands even after the marriage and because weddings themselves had become occasions for conspicuous spending and public claims for status. Abdul Aziz attributed the element of compulsion in dowry to a shift from the 'normal eligible bachelor to a "fancy" product' (with English education, formal sector job etc.); further, adolescent daughters are 'perishable commodities' who must be married as soon as possible because of fears that they will be 'dishonoured' (Aziz 1983: 604). Similarly, Rita Bhandari Sambrani & Shreekant Sambrani (1983: 602) noted the 'expropriatory characteristics' of dowry and the 'virtual auction of the eligible men to the highest bidders' with dowry escalation fuelled by the pressure on girls' parents to accept a good match as soon as one materialises. Twenty years later, Ravinder Kaur (2007) reports that people in Haryana connect seeing a daughter as a burden with the need to provide a dowry, a view that is paralleled in my own fieldwork (see e.g., Jeffery & Jeffery 1996: 69-97). Writing about Muslims in central India, Sylvia Vatuk (2007) reports that they view dowry as a cancer or running sore (*jahez kā nāsūr*) that has been adopted quite recently in imitation of Hindu practices: people associated it with a decline in marriages between close relatives.

It is, then, likely that dowries have increased in size and have spread to new areas and groups, and plausible that the pace of change has increased since the 1980s and especially since the economic reforms of the early 1990s. In any case, people's *perceptions* of dowry escalation, increasing demands and harassment are probably more salient for understanding how daughter aversion might relate to dowry. Here I shall focus on arguments about the relationships between changes in dowry and the 'marriage squeeze'. How (if at all) are dowry practices linked to demographic change and daughter aversion? Does dowry-giving reflect a surplus of marriageable young women—and will it decline if the marriage squeeze reverses?

Dowry and the Marriage Squeeze:

In India, men usually marry women a few years younger (say 2-10 years: age differences are generally lowest in the north). Thus assessments of the 'marriage squeeze' necessitate comparing the sizes of relevant age cohorts. During the early 20th century, high levels of child mortality meant that younger age cohorts were generally similar in size from those somewhat older, although sex differentials in mortality created some 'surplus' of potential grooms. Since 1947, however, child mortality declined earlier than fertility: younger cohorts became larger, although the 'surplus' of females was not as large as it might have been, given higher levels of female child mortality. Additionally, improvements in adult women's survival reduced levels of widowhood and thus of men available for second marriages (Bhat & Halli 1999).

According to the arguments of Bhat and of Das Gupta and their colleagues (Bhat & Halli 1999; Das Gupta & Li 1999; Das Gupta et al. 2003) linking dowry to the 'marriage squeeze', the resulting 'shortage' of marriageable men has meant that girls' parents feel compelled to respond to escalating dowry demands in order to ensure that their daughters can marry. Moreover, they predict that the demographic parameters that they consider responsible for dowry escalation are set to change—with knock-on effects on dowry and daughter aversion. When fertility declines (and especially when the decline is rapid), younger cohorts become smaller than older ones. In some regions, the resulting 'shortages' of young women are exacerbated by excess female child mortality and sex-selective abortion. And, so the argument runs, dowry will begin to wither. P. N. Mari Bhat & Shiva S. Halli (1999) argue that a shortage of potential brides increased after about 1991. Rising ages of marriage for men might compensate (but only partially) for this reversal in the 'marriage squeeze', so gradually the 'price' of grooms on the marriage market would probably reduce. Similarly, Das Gupta and others suggest that 'the surplus of men that we can expect for birth cohorts after 1980 means that there is hope that dowry inflation will taper off' (Das Gupta & Li 1999: 363) and that

[m]any studies indicate that the surge in dowry payments in India is related to an unusual configuration of demographic forces, which are no longer at play. Population projections indicate that a shortage of brides and brideprice will begin to manifest itself again in Northwest India in the early twenty-first century ... and this is already being reported in the media (Das Gupta et al. 2003: 182).

This kind of argument echoes discussions in the early 1980s, when amniocentesis first began to be used for prenatal sex determination in India (see e.g. Ramanamma & Bambawale, 1980). Dharma Kumar suggested that sex-selective abortion was preferable to infanticide or neglect of female children and (whilst she expressed some reservations about overly economic readings) she predicted that sex selection

will reduce the supply of women, they will become more valuable, and female children will be better cared for and will live longer. We have here a good instrument for balancing the supply of and demand for women, and for equating their price all over India (since caste, regional, religions and other barriers prevent the movement of women). So in course of time one should expect dowries to fall in the North (Kumar 1983: 63).

Her critics raised several issues. Leela Dube, for example, noted that ‘shortages’ of women historically had been dealt with by polyandry, abduction, bride purchase etc. and she predicted that amniocentesis would probably spread as costs of the procedure declined (Dube, 1983a, 1983b). Vishwanath (1983) argued that Kumar’s comparison between infanticide and sex-selective abortion ignored the different provenance of the two practices (predominantly rural elites practising infanticide and urban educated upper class practising amniocentesis) and that she also failed to address the crucial role of hierarchy and hypergamy, which meant that high status men may experience no shortage of women and marry with dowries, whilst poor men may find it hard to marry. My own interventions in this debate also suggested that sex-selection techniques would probably become increasingly popular as norms for lower fertility became more widespread, that economic inequalities mean that marriageable women would be monopolised by wealthy men, that increasing masculinity in the sex ratio was itself symptomatic of women’s low value and there was, in any case, no evidence that women are like economic commodities whose value would increase if they were in short supply (Jeffery & Jeffery 1983; Jeffery et al. 1984). In similar vein in response to Bhat and Gupta, Sudha and Rajan (2003) do not consider that shortages of marriageable women will enhance their value on the marriage market: on the contrary, they comment, ‘[s]hortfalls in the “supply” of women will lead to their being subject to greater restrictions, control and violence, as in China, where shortage of marriageable women in some areas has led to kidnapping and sale of women from other regions [Das Gupta and Shuzhuo (sic) 1999]’ (Sudha & Rajan 2003: 4368).

In other words, the relationships between changing marriage payments and demographic change are not as simple as proponents of the ‘marriage squeeze’ thesis suggest. A closer examination of how marriages are arranged in contemporary India will expand on this point.

Daughter Aversion and Dowry in the 21st Century

Multiple marriage markets:

Most marriages in India are and will probably continue to be arranged or at least overseen by family elders for many years to come—with some exceptions, such as a select stratum of educated cosmopolitan professionals. Small-scale studies indicate that elders conventionally consider caste/sub-caste, religious community membership, bodily appearance, and the educational level of the potential spouses, their families’ relative economic position (with a tendency towards economic isogamy, or hypergamy with the bride ‘marrying up’) and the

occupations of their members (especially the potential groom) (see e.g. Billig 1991). There is, then, evidence aplenty that the criteria used in selecting suitable marriage partners involve much more than their ages.

Large-scale studies usually enable disaggregation between rural and urban residents down to the district level. Unpacking other intra-regional differences is often not possible, however. Whilst Scheduled Castes and Tribes are routinely detailed separately, other castes tend to be enumerated in combined lists, people's religious community membership is not always registered and estimating people's economic position is fraught with complexity. Michael S. Billig (1991), for instance, notes the impossibility of obtaining reliable information on dowry or on sizes of 'marriage pools' disaggregated by caste. Without further disaggregation, though, we can neither understand what is currently happening nor make plausible predictions about the future. Moreover, different settings may require different explanations (Banerjee & Jain 2001), and wider economic processes and class differences—as well as demography—are undoubtedly important at the intra-regional level. Getting to grips with how (if at all) demographic factors impinge on dowry would require more nuanced understandings than the marriage squeeze model has provided so far.

Fertility decline in northern India has been marked by greater discrimination against girls and more widespread use of sex-selective abortion than in the south, so the 'marriage squeeze' might appear to favour potential brides, if not already then in the near future. Once young men's employment prospects are factored in, however, the picture looks very different. Job creation has been an intractable issue throughout India's post-Independence experience. India's apparently spectacular economic performance in recent years has been termed 'jobless growth', with only small numbers of highly-trained people entering the newly-created jobs in IT and its spin-offs (see e.g. Joshi 2010). The agricultural sector has failed to absorb all the new potential workers, over 90 per cent of workers are in the informal sector, and there is increasing casualisation of employment, with particularly high levels of youth unemployment and widening income inequalities (McNay et al. 2004). Yet the working-age population will increase by 1.5 times between 2001 and 2026 (McNay et al. 2004: 170). All these additional people are unlikely to obtain secure or well-paid employment (Acharya et al. 2004: 206 ff.).

This issue is particularly acute in the large northern states, where the slow decline in fertility (after child mortality had declined substantially) has resulted in fragmentation of land-holdings that reduces both their viability and the rural job opportunities for landless/land-poor men. This region also has a record of sluggish job creation (Acharya et al. 2004: 217; Dyson 2010: 40-41). Already, most potentially employed men face considerable problems in the labour market and experience insecure 'informal' sector work and/or extended periods of

under- and un-employment or employment in poorly-paid activities, even if they are educated (see e.g. Jeffrey 2010; Jeffrey et al. 2008). Well-settled young men are currently (and will continue to be) in short supply (Banerjee & Jain 2001).

If the marriage squeeze model can provide any insights on daughter aversion and dowry (and I have my doubts), it can only do so if we think in terms of numerous marriage markets (not one marriage market), with multiple marriage squeezes operating at different levels of the class hierarchy simultaneously. One ‘marriage squeeze’ favours ‘suitable boys’ who are sought out as grooms. Virtually all young women can marry, but they are siphoned upwards, and women near the top of the hierarchy must provide large dowries. Conversely, a marriage squeeze operates against men without resources or employment prospects who experience a shortage of women (cf. Billig 1991; Vishwanath 1983). Such a class-differentiated scenario has a long history in north-west India. Tried and tested solutions to poor men’s compromised marriage chances are not as prestigious as marriage with dowry, but local shortages of brides can be short-circuited by various means: importing brides without dowries—from the northern hills, eastern Gangetic plain, Bangladesh, even Kerala—generally with grooms making some payment (Blanchet 2005; Das Gupta & Li 1999; Jeffery & Jeffery 1996: 321-244; Jeffery et al. 1989: 39-40; Kaur 2004, 2008); de facto fraternal polyandry, when a man’s wife is shared with his brothers (Jeffery & Jeffery 1997: 229 ff.); marrying widows to their husband’s younger brother (levirate) (e.g. Chowdhry 1994); or marrying a physically-challenged woman (see also Dube 1983a, 1983b). In effect, there is a longstanding and continuing ‘marriage squeeze’ operating against poor men—at the same time as dowry continues to be a *sine qua non* for marriage higher up the class hierarchy.

Nevertheless, like Bhat, Das Gupta and colleagues (Bhat & Halli 1999; Das Gupta & Li 1999; Das Gupta et al. 2003), some commentators see dowry escalation as a transitory phenomenon that will reverse once more educated grooms are available or when the fertility transition reduces the numbers of potential brides (see e.g. Botticini & Siow 2003; Caldwell et al. 1983). But this ‘marriage squeeze’ approach rests on a kind of economic demography that presumes a single perfectly competitive ‘market’ in potential spouses: ‘shortages’ or ‘surpluses’ of grooms or brides affect their relative value as (in effect) economic commodities, which is reflected in marriage payments. Rather than withering, however, dowry is more likely to persist in the upper reaches, whilst increasing numbers of poor men must wait (or ‘queue’) for many years to marry or even fail to marry at all (cf. Guilmoto 2010, 2012: 81). Given men’s poor economic prospects and the marked gender bias in northern India, the ‘crisis of masculinity’ (Chowdhry 2005) linked to wide class differences in young men’s ability to become fully adult (that is, husbands and breadwinners) will be more acute there than in the south.

Gross demographic statistics, then, provide little insight into how marriages are arranged ‘on the ground’, so using them to make predictions about the long-term impact of contemporary demographic shifts on marriage practices is bound to us astray. Moreover, there is a danger that a pre-occupation with demographics, ‘marriage squeezes’ and how they connect with daughter aversion and dowry distracts attention from other considerations that are crucial to understanding marriage and family-life in contemporary India.

Patrilocal marriage and daughter aversion:

In India’s current ‘jobless growth’ trajectory, young men face considerable problems in obtaining satisfactory employment. Economic independence is very elusive for women, too, but their ‘unemployment’ is largely hidden within the home, before and after marriage. Young women, then, generally must comply with their parents’ wishes for their marriage, not least because marriage remains their best chance of economic wellbeing. In various other ways, too, compulsory heterosexual marriage reinforces gender inequalities (Basu 2009; Tomalin 2009a). Among these is women’s marriage migration, which is a crucial but often ignored issue that has manifold implications.

Marriage in India is generally patrilocal, that is, a bride leaves her parents and joins her husband (and his wider family) (see e.g. Agrawal & Unisa 2007; Banerjee & Jain 2001; Klasen & Wink 2002). Married women in northern India confront several obstacles in maintaining frequent contact with their natal kin: large marriage distances, poor transport and communications, normative restrictions on visits from their natal kin and controls over their own visits to their natal place. Young women face enormous upheaval: the grief of separation and a disempowering isolation from the supportive networks of their childhood (Jeffery & Jeffery 1988, 1996; Palriwala 1999).³

These considerations are exacerbated by dowry. Grooms’ families have the upper hand, because of the compulsory character of dowry and the possibility of continuing extortion. Marriage migration in combination with dowry makes young married women vulnerable to dowry demands, violence and harassment, and parents’ anxieties about their married daughters might result in their sacrificing the interests of other family members or going into debt.

But women’s marriage migration provides strong grounds for not wishing to raise daughters even when there is no dowry system, as Das Gupta et al. (2003) note. In a dowry system with patrilocal residence, a groom’s parents make outlays that remain with their household (e.g.

³ Jeffrey and Doron (2013), however, indicate how mobile phones may be moderating this.

providing a home for the young couple)—but they also obtain long-term benefits from the bride, unlike her parents (cf. Kaur 2008; Sudha & Rajan 2003). Overwhelmingly, India's elderly live with relatives, particularly their own adult children, even in the urban areas (see Collard 2000; Croll 2006).

Throughout north India, though, receiving anything from a daughter is disapproved. Thus, Christophe Z. Guilmoto (2009) argues, fertility decline has increased the risk of being sonless, not reduced the need for a son. In a low fertility regime, this requirement impacts on the chances that female infants are born or will survive childhood. Women themselves have a significant stake in bearing sons, of course, but they may also be pressurised to bear at least one son or coerced into having a sex-selective abortion. Women's marriage migration in itself, then, perpetuates son preference, because sons and their wives should care for elderly parents. In north India, population-ageing is proceeding more slowly than in the south, and for some decades to come most elderly people will have several sons on whom to rely (see Dyson 2004: 99 ff.). Such support, however, cannot be guaranteed (Kabeer 2000), and, in particular, elderly people without property can exercise little leverage over their sons.

India is now experiencing population-ageing but with little prospect of comprehensive and affordable social provision for the elderly from either the state or the market. We cannot be sure how long the expectation that sons (as distinct from daughters) provide support in old age will persist. Das Gupta (2009) argues that social and economic changes are 'unravelling' the rationale for son preferences, and challenging expectations that daughters migrate to their in-laws' home and that parents should rely only on sons. So far, though, there is only limited evidence for such shifts, mainly in urban areas. In India's north and north-west, where upwards of 70 per cent of the population lives in rural areas, women's marriage migration remains a central part of taken-for-granted assumptions across the class spectrum. Marriage migration is likely to be resilient there for some time to come. Consequently, to the extent that marriage migration is linked to daughter aversion, masculine child sex ratios are probably not a thing of the past.

Dowry, Status Competition and Consumerism in neoliberal India:

Das Gupta et al. (2003) predict that dowry inflation will gradually reverse because demographic processes are creating a surplus of men and a shortage of brides but there are some further compelling arguments against this optimistic scenario. This requires an examination of dowry in the wider context of the social and economic changes associated most recently with economic liberalisation in India.

That said, though, discussions relating to the early post-1947 period note the relevance of status competition to dowry (e.g. Sharma 1984; Tambiah 1989) and, indeed, dowry has been a

concern in areas of northern India that have been characterised by particularly masculine sex ratios since at least the early 19th century and that are the main locus of sex-selective abortion today. Aspects of gender politics (such as female infanticide) sometimes featured in 19th century critiques, but commentaries often focused primarily on the indebtedness caused by compulsory displays of ostentatious generosity to honour the groom's family, self-aggrandisement and the staking of status claims by the bride's family, and fear of disgrace (e.g. Ali 1832; Metcalf 1992; Sangari 1999; Sharar 2001). Historians and others link increasing dowry expenditures to the economic changes precipitated during the colonial period: increasing monetisation of the economy; taxation and the resulting indebtedness; markets being flooded with new consumer goods; growing prosperity (for some); and young men employed in the expanding formal economy (in the army, administration and construction) becoming 'scarce commodities' who could expect large dowries (e.g. Majumdar 2009; Oldenburg 2002: 10, 73ff.; Sheel 1999). For Veena Talwar Oldenburg, 'the potential for the custom [dowry] to be converted into blackmail or extortion had increased in an increasingly male-dominated world' (Oldenburg 2002:173). For Srinivas, 'the monster of modern dowry has grown from such humble beginnings' (1984: 4).

Whilst there is a risk of exaggerating the changes precipitated by economic liberalisation, recent data suggest that economic inequality has increased since the early 1990s (Sarkar & Mehta 2010) and India's economic trajectory has been one of remarkable (but 'jobless') economic growth. There are, then, continuing and perhaps worsening 'shortages' of men in secure well-paid jobs. Moreover, hypergamy tends to increase the pool of potential brides available for such men, whilst Padma Srinivasan & Gary R. Lee (2004) also suggest that low fertility at the top of the economic hierarchy may further enable potential grooms' families to pick and choose. The privileged position of the wealthiest men on the marriage market, then, may fuel dowry escalation, and we should not expect any homogenisation of marriage markets and marriage practices in the near future.

Further, whilst status competition was a crucial element in marriage and dowry long before economic liberalisation, ostentation and display (and thus expense) seem to have taken on a new lease of life since the mid-1980s. Sharada Srinivasan (2005: 604ff.) sees an intensification of contradictory processes that have been developing since the late 19th century—economic insecurity, casualisation of labour and widening gaps between rich and poor alongside increased availability of consumer goods and rising aspirations (cf. Srivastava 2002: 259-260; Subramaniam et al. 2009). Ravinder Kaur (2008), Rajni Palriwala (2009) and Padma Srinivasan & Gary R. Lee (2004) all stress the role of dowry and ostentatious marriage ceremonies in people's pursuit of status claims. Even Monica Das Gupta & Li Shuzhuo (1999) note that dowry can attain a normative status—which would perhaps operate against the

tapering off in dowry inflation that they predict. To this list, Palriwala (2009) adds the identity politics that have beset India since the late 1980s: middle-class Hindu anxiety about loss of identity, she suggests, sparked assertions of primordial identities, including ‘traditional’ practices associated with weddings and dowry (and, more generally, Hindutva’s regressive gender politics).

In addition, the period of economic liberalisation has resulted in the increasing availability of consumer goods, and contemporary dowry is intimately connected to India’s increasingly market-driven economy (AIDWA 2003; Narayan 1997: 110). For Srimati Basu (2009), dowry became normalised during the 1990s and rose inexorably in the face of consumerism and people’s new consumerist identities. People’s benchmarks for what is necessary to sustain an acceptable standard of living continually rise (Kaur 2008). Rising aspirations for possessions and domestic comforts, however, co-exist with young men’s difficulties in attaining economic security. One way of squaring this circle is through dowry: as Palriwala (1989) put it, women are commodities themselves but also the conduits through which commodities are obtained in a largely patrilineal and patrilocal society. For ‘many in the middle and lower middle class, dowry is the means to acquire desired consumer goods, capital for investment, bribes to “buy” secure jobs, or an investment which may draw in further wealth’ (Palriwala 2009: 161; see also Srinivasan & Lee 2004). Faced with growing uncertainties about their livelihood prospects, many young men (and their elders) are increasingly unwilling to arrange marriages without a cash incentive: some men can access consumer goods and cash only via their wife’s dowry, whilst particular occupations and castes may have specified rate-charts (Banerjee & Jain 2001). Some men with good employment prospects might opt for marriages without dowries, but (as Ravinder Kaur (2007) notes) they are in a position to command larger dowries than other men. And, since there is no sign that the desire for material goods is abating, this aspect of dowry is also likely to persist.

In combination with women’s marriage migration and the growth of consumerism, moreover, the expectation that the bride’s family will continually provide goods and cash throughout the life of the marriage can place the wife in a vulnerable position—one that puts further pressure on her parents to ensure that they are as generous as possible (cf. Narayan 1997: 83-117).

Demands are a feature not only of the period prior to the marriage or of the dowry narrowly understood and parents and married women alike express concerns about security and protection from ill-treatment in the marital home (Basu 2001: Chapter 3; Palriwala 2009; Srinivasan & Lee 2004). As Laurel Bossen (1988: 141) starkly noted: ‘In effect, there is a risk that a woman can become a hostage to a family that has already fully claimed the ransom from the bride’s parents.’

Demography and Political Complacency

I am, then, not at all sanguine that declining fertility in conjunction with masculine child sex ratios will (in due course) result in the reversal of a marriage squeeze that supposedly leads to a decline in dowry (because young men would no longer be in short supply) and a gradual reduction in daughter aversion (which would be evidenced in a declining incidence of sex-selective abortion).

Whilst demographic processes may play some part in dowry escalation and daughter aversion, the situation is much more complex than this kind of demographic determinism allows—and thus the prognosis for the future is also more complicated and uncertain. Indeed, there are compelling reasons for thinking that dowry and daughter aversion can both continue, even if demographic shifts might appear to suggest the reverse. Given marriage migration and the lack of social provision for the care of the elderly (on the one hand) and status competition and consumerism (on the other), daughter aversion is likely to continue and brides' parents will still provide as much dowry as possible. People in the middle ranks will mimic those above them in their efforts to make status claims, and many people will make outlays that they can ill-afford. Meanwhile, men at the bottom of the class hierarchy may be unable to contract marriages that bring a dowry and may have to queue for years to marry at all.

In other words, dowry and daughter aversion should be analysed in tandem with competitive display and rising expectations, and with India's changing livelihood options and how they play out in gendered ways at different levels in the class hierarchy. They are not best understood in terms of timeless or archaic cultural traditions, religious texts or emotion or even as something that is significant for gender politics narrowly understood (Basu 2005b; Narayan 1997: 83-117; Tomalin 2009b). Nor should they be too closely coupled to the lens of 'marriage squeeze' and demographic change.

My objections here are not only theoretical, however. A common presumption among demographers (and others) is that declining fertility benefits women. Some benefits no doubt do result—for instance in reducing women's life-time risk of maternal mortality and maternal depletion. Yet fertility decline in India, especially in the north, has been gender-biased. How can that be read in a wholly positive light? Why should we accept that it might lead to a reversal of the marriage squeeze against women and a reduction in dowry that benefits women? The belief in the capacity of demographic change to enhance women's position is paradoxical and over-simplifies an extremely complex situation. And such misplaced optimism that demographic shifts will result in the erosion of dowry and daughter aversion runs the danger of allowing space for political complacency about the trajectory of gender politics in neoliberal India.

Since the early 1980s, feminist activism in India has campaigned on numerous issues, among them dowry and sex-selective abortion (see e.g. AIDWA 2003; Basu 2005a; Bradley et al. 2009). Yet, as Barbara Harriss-White (1999) argues, declines in fertility coupled with the increasing need to provide old-age support—a form of ‘demographic “structural adjustment” without precedent’ (148-9)—pull in the opposite direction from the Indian government’s piecemeal (and ineffective) efforts to eradicate dowry and sex-selective abortion. Many feminists, indeed, would argue that focusing on specific problems such as dowry and sex-selective abortion merely tackles symptoms rather than their deeper causes. Dowry and daughter aversion are embedded in gender politics more generally and this implies, as Emma Tomalin (2009a) puts it, profound structural changes that transform gender relations rather than mere window-dressing. These would include, for instance, addressing women’s property rights and access to education and employment. But gender politics themselves are embedded in the rapidly changing economic and political context of a competitive, highly unequal and increasingly consumerist society. Jobless growth adversely affects young men’s prospects, but it also fails to provide much scope for women’s economic independence. This all implies, then, a rather daunting and long-term political agenda focusing not solely on the politics of the domestic sphere but also on the pernicious effects of national and global economic processes—and certainly not in-activism bred of complacent assumptions that things will all work out for the best as a result of inexorable demographic processes.

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